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Since she can't be, she performs: A brief study of female roles in Kate Chopin's "The awakening"

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A historical overview of nineteenth-century's literature in English would certainly reveal a range of representations and impressions on femininity. A significant example from Victorian era is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, categorized as a *bildungsroman*, which, by focalizing a distinctive, disruptive – and, so, revolutionary – perspective on a woman's life, her formation, her overcoming of gender-oriented norms and barriers, her rising in society, unleashed debates that problematized socially established female roles. North-America's crucial literary works from that period also presented points of view on what was believed it should or shouldn't be like to be a woman according to social criteria. In Henry James' *Daisy Miller*, the young protagonist, breaking with traditional European customs on account of actions such as her public parading with two men simultaneously, has her flourishing behavior assessed as driven either by innocence or immorality – any of which considered unacceptable for the case of respectable women, at least from higher social classes. The narration is finally taken on by a woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, although she isn't given control over her own life once her voice is circumscribed to the room from which she isn't allowed to leave, due to her sanity and intellectual capacity getting questioned by male characters like her husband; a noteworthy particularity of this short-story is that it was actually inspired on the author's experiences, proving social gender discriminations and women's abuse/oppression to be unfortunately accurate.

These considerations lead to the inference that legitimate configurations of women (other than the societally affirmed ones) weren't welcome in North-American nineteenth-century standards, that being reflected and supported by literary works. The tragic duality to which female characters seem to be fatally confined goes as: either i) following their instincts and getting labeled as, for instance, reprehensibly immoral, improperly innocent, mentally ill; or

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ii) absolutely annulating their genuine selves in order to fit into patriarchal social expectations, conventions and manners, mostly regarding to marriage, motherhood and householding. This is the thesis we'll now engage in to prove, collecting supporting evidence from Kate Chopin's *The awakening* and focusing on demonstrating how this second option is more likely compatible with a *performance*.

Relating, in the beginning of the novel, to the innocent-typed (once self-canceled, submissive) wife-mother, the heroine Edna Pontellier, by having developed a relationship with Robert Lebrun[1], enters on a journey of gradual self-discovery that'll culminate in her peeling-off[2] a gender-based code of conduct ever imposed[3] on her. External to marriage-family scope, another social interaction of Edna's that serves first as a remote role model and later as model to refusal is Madame Ratignolle, a great example of socially desirable acting for women considering her state of full commitment to wife-mother duties, achieved at the cost of her willingness to cancel her own self. The episode of the parents' feud over Edna's supposed negligence towards their son Raoul's fever, plus Leonce's criticizing of her standing out of the "mother-woman[4]" female pattern of Grand Island, illustrates how Adele represents what Edna will never be, the socially expected part she'll never fulfill – nor will she try to misplay any longer[5]. Thus, *performing* appears to be the only alternative left for women such as Adele or the initial occurrence of Edna, since there's nothing other than that for them to *sincerely* be, as an effect of the self-neutralizations they underwent so as to meet their respective household needs.

> "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul."

The novel's counterpart to Madame Ratignolle is Mademoiselle Reisz, a woman who didn't get constrained by gender settings (that is: she's marriage and maternity free), once she's devoted all her time, energy, vitality to her passion about music, she's pursued an artistic life playing not female socially stipulated roles, but, rather, the piano. However, this authenticity, social independence of hers has a price and it's her being evaluated[6] not only as "disagreeable and unpleasant", yet also (and worse!) as "partially demented", what makes her almost score all examples listed for the first component of the tragic duplexity we stated for female characters in North-American literary works. These two women, the main references to protagonist, with whom she matures different (opposite – because of the opposition they're themselves in) kinds of bonds along the path of encountering who she really is and getting rid of who/what she's not, of *awakening* her true self, with the aid of whom she, by denying their both portraits of extremes, matures herself, prove this inflexibility concerning (and, therefore, obstructing) other (new, free, deconstructed *etc.*) possibilities of *being* a woman, this rigid

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polarity society puts them in, apart from which they can't find a granted and safe existential refuge.

In face of the referred poles in female gender, where can Edna be socially placed, then? We believe that, during the course of searching for self-knowledge, as seen in her relationship with Ratignolle and Reisz (which also counts to her relationship with Lebrun and Arobin), it's in the *between* (that is: between orthodox and radical, *too-tight* and *too-loose*); nevertheless, when Edna finally comprehends and discerns *the-woman-she-is*, *the-woman-she-is-not*, *the-woman-she-wants-to-be* and *the-woman-she-does-not-want-to-be*, in other words, when she finds out that *balanced*, *centered* formula that works for her (and *only* for her, in virtue of her *uniqueness*, a result obtained from this whole process of her differentiating from the complex of expected versions of women, their female roles – "I give myself where I choose." [CHOPIN, 2014, pp. 115-116]), there seems to be no room left for her in the equation of society once welcomed her *asleep* self. The novel's ending scene, with the metaphor of fully connecting with the wildness of the ocean, aligning with the natural (instead of socially built) order of things of the world, manifesting themselves as they are, explains itself: once *self-revealed*, once *self-discovered*, once *gone*, she could return no more, she could put her true being to *sleep* no more – nor could/would she have been accepted the way she candidlywas. This performance of an *awakened* woman Edna had ultimately to offer Nineteenth-century society wasn't ready to embrace.

> "She felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known."

References

[1] What, in fact, certifies the condition of dependence in which she was originally settled. "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream." (CHOPIN, 2014, p. 116).

[2] A reference to the fact she closes the novel skinny-dipping.

[3] "She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves." (CHOPIN, 2014, p. 52)

[4] CHOPIN, 2014, p 11.

[5] "Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women

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did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain. 'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me'. 'I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential', said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; 'but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than thatyour Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that'." (CHOPIN, 2014, p. 52)

[6] CHOPIN, 2014, p. 89.

CHOPIN, Kate. *The awakening*. Adelaide (Australia): The University of Adelaide Library, 2014.

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